

Beginner's Guide: How to Read Nutrition Labels

Empower Yourself
at the Grocery Store



WHY UNDERSTANDING NUTRITION LABELS IS IMPORTANT

Understanding how to read food labels is a crucial skill in managing your nutrition effectively. By carefully examining the information provided on food labels, you can gain valuable insights into the ingredients, nutritional content, and serving sizes of the products you consume. This knowledge empowers you to make informed choices that align with your health and wellness goals. Remember, knowledge is power when it comes to nourishing your body and making thoughtful decisions about the foods you eat. So, take the time to decode food labels and embark on a journey towards a healthier lifestyle.

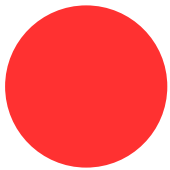
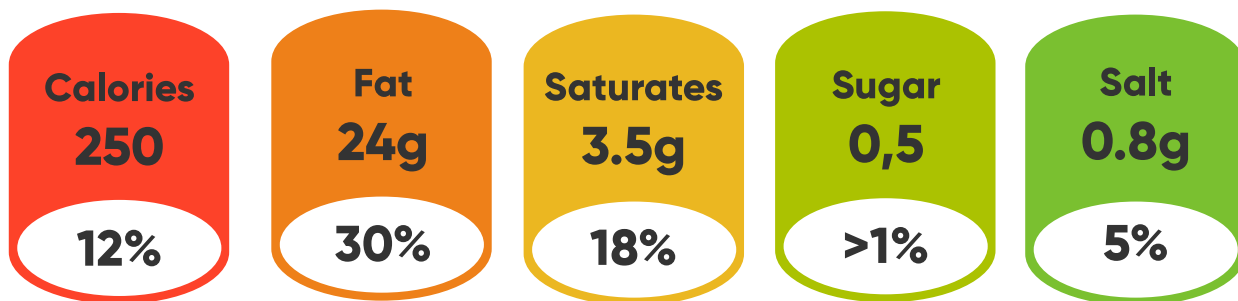
By familiarizing yourself with the details on food labels, you can take control of your dietary habits and make choices that support your well-being. Start by checking the serving size to ensure you're aware of how much you're actually consuming. Next, look at the list of ingredients to understand what goes into the product. Keep an eye out for hidden sugars, unhealthy fats, and artificial additives. Pay attention to the nutritional content, focusing on key elements like calories, protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

This information will guide you in selecting foods that nourish your body and contribute to your overall health. Remember, small changes in your food choices can lead to significant improvements in your health over time. So, equip yourself with the knowledge from food labels and pave the way for a healthier, happier you.

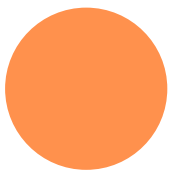


TRAFFIC LIGHT LABELING

The traffic light label on the front of food packages is designed to help consumers make informed choices about the nutritional value of the products they are purchasing. It typically includes information about the amount of calories, fat, sugar, and salt in the food item. By looking at the traffic light label, consumers can quickly assess whether the product is high, medium, or low in these key nutrients. This system aims to simplify the process of comparing different products and encourages consumers to opt for healthier options.



Red: This indicates high levels of certain nutrients that are best consumed in moderation. These can include sugar, fat (especially saturated fat), and salt (sodium). High levels of these nutrients can contribute to health issues such as obesity, heart disease, and high blood pressure. You should be mindful of foods high in these nutrients and try to limit their consumption.



Amber: This signifies moderate levels of nutrients. While not as concerning as red-labeled items, it's still advisable to consume these in moderation. Foods labeled amber may still contain significant amounts of sugar, fat, or salt, but not as much as those labeled red.



Green: This indicates low levels of certain nutrients that are beneficial for health. These can include fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Foods labeled green are generally healthier options and can be consumed more freely. You should aim to include more green-labeled foods in your diet as they provide essential nutrients with fewer adverse health effects.

NUTRITION FACTS - WHAT EACH LINE MEANS

Nutrition labels offer details on serving size, calories, macronutrients, vitamins, and minerals in a product. Understanding these labels helps individuals manage nutrient intake for healthier eating habits, promoting overall well-being and long-term health benefits.

Pay attention to the serving size listed at the top. All the information on the label is based on this serving size, so make sure to adjust according to how much you actually consume.

Look for the number of calories per serving. This tells you how much energy you'll get from the food. Be mindful of portion sizes to avoid consuming too many calories.

Keep an eye on the total fat content. Aim for moderate consumption, and be wary of foods high in unhealthy saturated and trans fats.

Saturated Fat and Trans Fat: Limit intake of saturated and trans fats, as they can raise cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease.

Watch your intake of cholesterol and sodium, as excessive consumption can negatively impact heart health and blood pressure levels.

Total Carbohydrates: Be mindful of the total carbohydrate content, but also pay attention to the source of carbohydrates (e.g., sugars vs. fiber).

Aim for foods high in dietary fiber, which aids digestion and helps you feel full longer.

Limit added sugars and opt for foods with low sugar content.

Look for foods with adequate protein content, as it's essential for muscle repair, growth, and overall body function.

Check the % Daily Value (%DV) for essential vitamins and minerals like calcium, iron, vitamin D, and potassium. Aim to meet or exceed these values to ensure adequate nutrient intake.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 100 g

Amount Per Serving

Calories 250 Calories from fat 10

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 4% 4%

Saturated Fat 1.5% 4%

Trans Fat

Cholesterol 50mg 28%

Sodium 150mg 15%

Total Carbohydrate 10g 3%

Dietary Fiber 5g

Sugars 3g

Protein 16%

Vitamin A 1% ▪ **Vitamin C** 3%

Calcium 2% ▪ **Iron** 2%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

NUTRITION FACTS - NUMERICAL

There's no high or low target for serving size, as it depends on individual dietary needs and portion control.	Nutrition Facts
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily calorie intake per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily calorie intake per serving.	Serving Size 100 g
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Amount Per Serving
<i>Saturated Fat and Trans Fat:</i> <i>High: Above 10% of the recommended daily value per serving.</i> <i>Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.</i>	Calories 250 Calories from fat 10
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	% Daily Value*
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Total Fat 4% 4%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Saturated Fat 1.5% 4%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Trans Fat
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Cholesterol 50mg 28%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Sodium 150mg 15%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Total Carbohydrate 10g 3%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Dietary Fiber 5g
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Sugars 3g
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Protein 16%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Vitamin A 1% ▪ Vitamin C 3%
High: Above 20% of the recommended daily value per serving. Low: Below 5% of the recommended daily value per serving.	Calcium 2% ▪ Iron 2%
	*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

These targets can vary based on individual health goals, dietary preferences, and specific nutritional needs. It's essential to consult with a healthcare provider or nutritionist for personalized recommendations.

INGREDIENTS – HOW LABELS ARE FORMATTED

Ingredient lists on food labels are designed and formatted to provide consumers with information about what the product contains. Here's a breakdown of how they work:

Order of Ingredients: Ingredients are listed in descending order of predominance by weight. This means that the ingredient present in the largest amount comes first, followed by those present in smaller amounts. For instance, if sugar is listed as the first ingredient, it means that the product contains more sugar than any other ingredient.

Ingredient Names: Ingredients are listed using their common or usual names, as specified by food labeling regulations. This helps consumers understand what each ingredient is. However, some ingredients may also be listed by their scientific or technical names. Pay attention to any ingredient ending in “ose” as this normally means it's a type of sugar.

Additives and Preservatives: Additives and preservatives are also listed in the ingredient list. These can include artificial colors, flavors, and stabilizers. They usually have specific names, often consisting of a number (such as “Red 40” or “BHA”), which can indicate their function or purpose.

Allergen Information: In many countries, allergens such as peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, soy, wheat, fish, and shellfish must be clearly identified in the ingredient list. This is typically done by highlighting them in some way, such as by using bold text, *italics*, or a different color.

INGREDIENTS - WHAT TO FOCUS ON

When trying to make healthier choices based on ingredient lists, here are some tips:

Check the First Few Ingredients: Since ingredients are listed in descending order of predominance, focusing on the first few ingredients can give you a good idea of what the product contains the most of. Look for whole foods and ingredients you recognize, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.

The few ingredients, the Better: Aim for 5 or less ingredients

Watch Out for Added Sugars and Sodium: Ingredients like sugar and salt can be listed under various names, so it's essential to be aware of these aliases. For sugar, look for words ending in "-ose" (like sucrose, glucose, fructose) or terms like cane sugar, high fructose corn syrup, and honey. For sodium, watch out for monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium nitrate/nitrite, and sodium benzoate.

Limit Artificial Additives: Try to avoid products with a long list of artificial additives and preservatives. Look for products with minimal processing and fewer artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives.

Be Mindful of Serving Sizes: Keep in mind that the nutritional information on the label is often based on a single serving size, which may be smaller than what you typically consume. Pay attention to portion sizes to avoid over consumption of unhealthy ingredients.

CORN, VEGETABLE OIL,
SALT, SUGAR (SUCROSE),
WATER OIL), SALT,
LACTOSE, WHEY, SUGAR,
GARLIC POWDER,
MALTODEXTRIN (MADE FROM
MILK, CHEESE CURDS, BUTTER,
ROSE, MALIC ACID, CITRIC ACID,
MILK, NATURAL FLAVOR, SALT,
ACETATE, ARTIFICIAL FLAVOR (CONTAINS
5), SPICE, CITRIC ACID, SODIUM GUANYLATE,
INGREDIENTS.

BE WARY OF CLEVER MARKETING

In the USA, the term "high protein" or "high fiber" on food packaging is not strictly regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the same way as terms like "low fat" or "organic." However, there are general guidelines that food companies typically follow when making such claims.

High Protein: While there is no specific definition for "high protein" established by the FDA, the general understanding is that foods labeled as such should contain a significant amount of protein relative to their total calorie content. A common rule of thumb is that a product may be considered "high protein" if it contains at least 20% of the Daily Value (DV) for protein per serving.

High Fiber: Similarly, there's no specific definition for "high fiber" established by the FDA. Foods labeled as high fiber usually contain a substantial amount of dietary fiber relative to their serving size. Again, a common guideline is that a product may be considered "high fiber" if it contains at least 20% of the DV for fiber per serving.

It's important to note that these percentages are not set in stone and can vary depending on the context and specific nutritional needs of individuals. Additionally, the FDA does regulate the use of health claims related to protein and fiber content. For instance, a product claiming to be a "good source of protein" must contain at least 10% of the DV per serving, while a product claiming to be a "good source of fiber" must contain at least 10% of the DV per serving.

If a product is labeled "low fat", be wary. It is typically filled with highly processed/artificial ingredients for flavor since the fat has been removed. The "lower" the fat is not always "healthier".





“HEALTHY” KIDS SNACKS

When looking at snacks labeled "healthy" on food packaging marketed to children, it is important to understand common misconceptions and discerning between genuinely nutritious options and those that may be misleading. Here's what to watch out for:

Added Sugars: Check the ingredients list for added sugars such as sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, and other syrups. Avoid foods with high amounts of added sugars, especially in products marketed to children like cereals, flavored yogurts, fruit snacks, and sweetened beverages.

Unhealthy Fats: Look for trans fats and saturated fats in the ingredients list. Trans fats are often found in processed foods like packaged snacks, baked goods, and fried foods and should be avoided as they can increase the risk of heart disease. Limit foods high in saturated fats, such as fatty meats, full-fat dairy products, and certain processed foods.

Artificial Additives/Natural flavors: Be cautious of artificial additives such as artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives. These additives are commonly found in processed snacks, cereals, and beverages marketed to children. Some artificial additives have been linked to behavioral issues in children and may have long-term health effects. Even "natural" flavors can contain hundreds of different ingredients.

Allergens: Check for common allergens like peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, dairy, and eggs, especially if your child has food allergies or sensitivities. Manufacturers are required to list allergens on food labels to help consumers make informed choices and avoid potential allergic reactions.

Nutrient Content: Pay attention to the nutritional content of foods, including protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Choose foods that are nutrient-dense and provide essential nutrients necessary for your child's growth and development. Look for whole food ingredients and avoid overly processed products with minimal nutritional value.

Portion Sizes: Be mindful of portion sizes when evaluating food packaging, especially for snacks and treats. Many packaged foods contain multiple servings per container, so check the serving size and adjust accordingly to prevent overconsumption of calories, sugar, and unhealthy fats.

Health Claims: Be skeptical of health claims on food packaging, such as "all natural," "organic," or "low-fat." These claims can be misleading and may not necessarily reflect the overall nutritional quality of the product. Instead, focus on reading the ingredients list and nutrition facts panel to assess the nutritional content of the food.

TOP TIPS: Kids often gravitate to snacks with their favorite characters (e.g Paw Patrol) on the packaging. Aim for snacks with the best nutritional balance and then add your own stickers from Amazon - I promise they never know the difference and it will likely save \$\$!

The less ingredients the better! Aim for 5 or fewer ingredients



NATURAL VS “ADDED SUGARS”

Naturally Occurring Sugars: These sugars are naturally present in foods such as fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. They come packaged with other nutrients like fiber, vitamins, and minerals, which can mitigate their effects on blood sugar levels. Consuming naturally occurring sugars as part of whole foods is generally considered healthier because of the accompanying nutrients and slower digestion, which can help regulate blood sugar levels.

Added Sugars: These are sugars and syrups added to foods during processing or preparation. They contribute to the sweetness of foods but often provide little to no nutritional value. Added sugars are commonly found in ultra-processed foods like sodas, candies, baked goods, and sweetened beverages. Excessive consumption of added sugars has been linked to various health issues, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and dental problems.

Myth: All sugars are equally harmful.

Reality: Naturally occurring sugars, when consumed in whole foods, are less concerning than added sugars because they come with beneficial nutrients.

Myth: Natural sweeteners are healthier than refined sugars.

Reality: While some natural sweeteners like honey or maple syrup may offer small nutritional benefits compared to refined sugars, they still contribute to total sugar intake and should be consumed in moderation.

WHO Recommendations: The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends limiting the intake of added sugars to less than 10% of total daily energy intake. However, they also suggest that reducing intake to below 5% (about 25 grams or 6 teaspoons) of total daily energy intake would provide additional health benefits. This recommendation applies to all individuals, regardless of gender.



NET CARBS

The concept of "net carbs" has its origins in the popularity of low-carbohydrate diets, particularly the Atkins Diet, which gained significant attention in the early 2000s. Dr. Robert Atkins introduced the Atkins Diet in the 1970s, emphasizing the restriction of carbohydrates to induce weight loss and improve overall health.

In the Atkins Diet, "net carbs" refer to the total carbohydrates in a food minus the fiber and certain sugar alcohols. The idea behind this calculation is that fiber and certain sugar alcohols have minimal impact on blood sugar levels, so they can be subtracted from the total carbohydrate count to determine the "net" amount of carbs that affect blood sugar.

The concept of net carbs gained traction among individuals following low-carb diets as a way to track carbohydrate intake more effectively while still allowing for some flexibility in food choices. Foods labeled as low in net carbs became popular among those seeking to manage their weight or control their blood sugar levels.

While the concept of net carbs has been embraced by some individuals and food manufacturers, it has also been met with criticism and skepticism from nutrition experts and health organizations. Critics argue that focusing solely on net carbs overlooks the importance of overall dietary quality and can lead to the consumption of highly processed, low-nutrient foods.

Despite the controversy surrounding net carbs, the concept continues to be used by some individuals and food companies as a way to market products and cater to consumers following low-carb or ketogenic diets. However, it's essential for individuals to consider the broader nutritional profile of foods and prioritize whole, nutrient-dense options for optimal health and well-being.



EAT WELL LIVE WELL

I hope you have increased your nutrition label knowledge
and feel more confident at the grocery store!
Use this as a tool in your journey but don't let it overwhelm you.
Health and wellness is a never ending journey we are all on.
Be kind to yourself and others.

Katie, The Black Hills Lifestyle Coach